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The Use of Affect in Positioning Strategy

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and Nicolas Papadopoulos***

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of affect in marketing positioning strategy and individual positioning judgements. We examine affect in both the marketing and positioning literatures and argue that vestiges of the dual mind perspective are alive and well in positioning. Viewing 'thinking' and 'feeling' as entirely separate (as in utilitarian vs. hedonic product distinctions) runs counter to advances in neuroscience and devalues individual differences and brain functioning. As a result of our own coding of positioning dimensions, we advocate for a greater understanding of the complex interplay between affect and cognition in positioning strategy and judgements.

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The Use of Affect in Positioning Strategy

Introduction

Positioning continues to occupy a key role in both the marketing literature (Hooley, Broderick, & Möller, 1998; Kotler, 1999) and in practice, as the strategic focal point in determining the marketing mix (Hibbert, 1995; Tyagi, 2000). As Ries and Trout (1981, p. 3) point out, positioning is so central because it "...is not what you do to a product. Positioning is what you do to the mind of the prospect. That is, you position the product in the mind of the prospect". Yet, despite the considerable quantity of positioning research, comparatively few empirical studies have actually examined what may be going on in the minds of consumers when a firm decides to position a product or service in a particular way (for notable exceptions see Blankson & Kalafatis, 2004; Ghose & Lowengart, 2001; Hibbert, 1995; Teas and Grapentine, 2004). This paper aims to take an initial step toward filling this void by using the marketing and psychology literatures to examine how and why consumers make positioning judgements.

The role of cognition and affect in consumer behaviour has seen much research attention (see Bagozzi, 1997). Specifically, the literature has been saturated with discussions over the role of emotion and cognition in making consumer choices (especially in advertising appeals). This paper will use advances in both neuroscience and psychology to argue that the positioning literature has lagged behind recently developed knowledge in defining what we mean by 'the minds of the prospects'. Further, because positioning has been argued to be the strategic umbrella under which the marketing mix is developed (Brooksbank, 1994; Tyagi, 2000), we argue that a better understanding of how emotions may affect positioning judgements may have important implications for all marketing activities.

This paper uses the consumer as the unit of analysis and employs a comprehensive literature review to examine how affect and cognition have been treated in the positioning niche, and the marketing literature, in general. We borrow heavily from lessons in personality and social psychology to suggest that whether and how consumers make positioning judgements may be more complex than currently depicted. In particular, we draw a much needed distinction between a firm's efforts to position a product or service (strategy), and the individual differences that may account for a high degree of variation in whether and how consumers may respond to it when making positioning judgements.

The paper draws upon a comprehensive and systematic literature review of all positioning studies that have been catalogued in a database for examination. We will first examine affect in the wider marketing literature to establish the rationale for why we believe that the consumer is the appropriate unit of analysis when discussing positioning judgements. We then examine how cognition and affect have been treated in the positioning literature and identify gaps using our systematic literature review. Lastly, we draw upon social and personality psychology to propose how consumers are likely to make positioning judgements, and the implications thereof for research on positioning, marketing strategy (and the marketing mix), practitioners who create positioning strategies, and consumers.

Affect in Marketing

Great strides have been made into exploring the role of affect in marketing over the past twenty years, with advertising seeing the greatest proportion of research and theorizing (Erevelles, 1998). However, despite the meaningful advances in the study of affect, research has assumed bidimensionality, in terms of cognition and affect, in much of the literature (see Batra & Ahtola, 1991). This approach is consistent with the widely held view that products have two basic dimensions: utilitarian, consisting of the functional attributes and performance characteristics; and hedonic, consisting of experiential, emotional and aesthetic aspects of the product (see Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982).

Most of the research and theorizing involving emotions in marketing has occurred in the consumer behaviour and advertising literatures. For instance, past research has examined advertisement-induced affect influences on advertisement and brand evaluations (e.g., Batra & Ray, 1986; Edell & Burke, 1987). Earlier studies have suggested that when both the context and the advertisement itself induce affect, consistency in the induced affect will lead to more favourable evaluations (Gardner & Wilhelm, 1988; Kamins, Marks & Skinner, 1991). More recent research has indicated that affect is more likely to exert influences on a judgement if it is perceived to be relevant to that judgement (see Pham, 1998). The marketing literature has also been influenced by developments in social psychology, and, consistent with the work of Rusting (1998), there now seems to be widespread agreement that personality differences moderate the degree to which individuals are influenced by affect-evoking stimuli (e.g., Forgas & Ciarrochi, 2001). A considerable body of research supports the holistic nature of affect (Larsen & Diener, 1987; Schwarz & Clore, 1988), and much of the marketing literature now acknowledges the complex interplay between affect and cognition (e.g., Sojka & Giese, 2006).

The Duality of Mind Perspective

While cognitive models have been deemed inadequate to account for the richer understanding of the experiential aspects of consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), the marketing literature, despite the advances noted above, continues to perpetuate the 'dual mind' perspective. That is, by conveniently isolating cognition and affect in order to study consumer behaviour in relation to advertising and other expressions of marketing strategy, the field may have overly simplified the complex neuropsychological functioning of consumers (with exceptions including Gordon (2002), Sojka & Giese (2006), and Williamson (2002)).

The duality of mind perspective views the consumer as having a rational (cognitive) aspect that battles with an emotional (irrational) component in forming attitudes or product judgements, a perspective refuted by advances in neuroscience (see Damasio, 1994). In a recent article (Scarabis, Florack, & Gosejohann, 2006, p. 1015) went so far as to contrast emotion as "lower-order affective processes" while cognition was portrayed as psychological functioning untainted by emotional colour. This portrayal builds and perpetuates Shiv and Fedorikan's (1999) portrayal of the heart and mind in conflict by assuming that one has to isolate cognitive and emotional processing resources to understand behavioural (usually buying intention) decisions. In a much cited paper, Shiv and Fedorikan (1999) examined choices between chocolate cake and fruit salad and found that when people were "cognitively busy" they preferred the chocolate cake, but when cognitive resources were not "constrained" they chose fruit salad. While this was an interesting

experiment, the number of potential confounds were not addressed and the social psychological theoretical underpinning was somewhat lacking. This paper is an excellent example of the belief that when our minds are preoccupied with a task, only cognitive resources are being utilized. Quite to the contrary, social psychological research has demonstrated for decades (see Larsen & Diener, 1987; Schwarz & Clore, 1988) that most tasks (such as writing up a report for an important deadline) stimulate both cognitive and affective dimensions of the brain. Further, the adrenaline that stimulates a person into action to complete such a task emanates from the pre-frontal cortex of the brain (where emotional responses can be observed by magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)), and our feelings regarding whether we have adequate skill, time, or other resources to complete the task (to name but an obvious few) are also emotion based. The point is that being “cognitively busy” does not mean that we are not *simultaneously* “emotionally busy”. While it is convenient to make such distinctions in research, there must also be an acknowledgment that the neuroscientific theoretical foundations and advances are underrepresented in mainstream marketing research.

There is now widespread agreement that thinking and feeling are inseparable (Ben-Ze’ev, 2000; Gigerenzer & Selten, 2001; Maturana, 1988). Emotions are intertwined with human thinking and behaviour, not psychologically distinct from them, and certainly not a lesser human substrate somehow subservient to rationality. Therefore, attempts at operationalizing the utilitarian vs. hedonic approach to products, brands, or organizations implicitly assumes that all, or most, consumers arrive at judgements in the same fashion. We will use our own experience in coding positioning dimensions to challenge this view.

Affect in Positioning

Despite the strategic role of positioning as the driver of the marketing mix, “there is little research that has examined how affect may influence the design and implementation of strategic marketing decisions” (Erevelles, 1998, p. 208). We undertook a comprehensive literature review to discern the prevalence of affect (emotion) in research on positioning and to identify any conceptual and methodological gaps. An attempt was made to identify and develop an extensive list of all the relevant academic literature on the topic. With a combination of different keywords, the literature was searched first using an online database, Business Source Premier, which indexes over 3,300 scholarly journals. Once the online resources were fully exhausted, the references of all the major studies that were identified through this first step were checked to identify the studies that were not captured by the online search. The final sample comprises 90 studies, conceptual and empirical, focused on positioning strategies. These studies cover a time frame of 36 years (1970 to 2005) and refer to a total of 584 positioning “dimensions”.

We followed the traditional definitions of cognition and affect in the marketing literature in order to code the dimensions. That is, the positioning literature implies that strategies can be based on cognitive only strategies, affect only strategies, or some combination of the two (see Pike & Ryan, 2004). Cognition, as depicted in the positioning literature, depends on the utilitarian, rational, and logical arguments in favour of the product. On the other hand, affective positioning strategies are designed to make emotional appeals to the target market based on hedonic characteristics.

Based on the underlying themes, the studies were divided into five streams depending on the object of the marketing strategy in question – strategies concerning products, services, corporations, places, and market offerings overall (generic positioning). The next stage in the analysis was to compare affective and cognitive dimensions within each stream to uncover positioning patterns in the five streams. The findings of the analysis are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Affective versus Cognitive Dimensions within Streams

Stream	Aff.	Cog.	Cog./Aff.	Total	Aff. (percent)	Cog. (percent)	Cog./Aff. (percent)
Product	9	75	15	90	10%	83%	5%
Services	6	43	9	52	12%	83%	17%
Corporate	57	231	5	303	19%	76%	6%
Place	41	41	6	87	47%	47%	7%
Generic strategy	18	25	3	52	35%	48%	6%
Total	131	415	38	584	22%	71%	7%

The coding results show considerable variance in the use of affective dimensions by stream. Cognitive approaches dominated positioning strategies within the product, service, corporate, and generic streams. Only in place positioning did the number of affective appeals equal the cognitive appeals (consistent with research on the importance of affective destination strategies – see Pike and Ryan (2004)).

What the results do not depict is the qualitative challenges encountered in coding dimensions into affective, cognitive, or mixed categories. For example, customer service was the most frequently mentioned cognitive positioning dimension, and using the utilitarian-hedonic approach to affect and cognition we coded this as ‘cognitive’ in the sense that customer service would be deemed to be an important functional attribute. However, for many consumers, customer service may also have a strong affective component, as individual differences in personality and life experience may cause some consumers to view customer service in an experiential and emotional (hedonic) light (e.g., how did the customer service experience leave the customer feeling?). This is consistent with the recent trend toward placing significantly greater emphasis on “experiential shopping” in marketing practice as well as research. The same can be said for the affective dimensions, where the most frequently coded dimension was ‘attractive’. While some consumers may view the attractive nature of, for example, a product as aesthetic (hedonic), individual differences may account for other consumers viewing ‘attractive’ as part of the functional attributes (utilitarian). For example, cell phone design and function are difficult to distinguish, especially amongst teens and young adults. Other dimensions, such as country of origin, were coded as both cognitive and affective as they more easily could conjure up both thinking about functional attributes (e.g., German engineering), and feeling, i.e. experiential and emotional, attributes (e.g., images of vineyards in Tuscany potentially associated with Italian wine).

In fact, country of origin is an excellent example of where our past experiences, personality and emotions coalesce to form strongly held beliefs. In this context, the recent research of Knight and

Calantone (2000), Villaneuva and Papadopoulos (2003), and others, as well as earlier studies (e.g., Morello, 1993, and Li, Fu, and Murray, 1997) argues strongly in favour of a far more prominent role for affect in country-of-origin judgements than was previously thought. Importantly, the emerging literature on the effects of animosity, though limited in scope (e.g., see Klein, Ettenson, and Morris 1998), specifically shows that affective factors can supercede cognitive considerations in consumer decision making.

Through the process of trying to code positioning dimensions we came to two important conclusions: 1) calls for more empirical research on the use of cognitive versus affective positioning strategies (e.g., Erevelles, 1998; Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002) would be well served by understanding that 'thinking' and 'feeling' are dynamically interwoven; and 2) that our coding was not only perpetuating the hedonic vs. utilitarian distinction, but that we found ourselves trying to guess how most consumers might view positioning dimensions through a maze of our own psychological biases. As an alternative, we turn to social and personality psychology to examine how affect and cognition combine to arrive at positioning judgements based upon individual differences.

Traits, States, and Positioning Judgements

It can be argued that the mind of the consumer is an important, yet sometimes overlooked, aspect of positioning strategies. We now examine positioning from the perspective of the consumer. Personality and emotions help to explain why people may come to different assessments, positioning judgements, and potentially purchase decisions, given the same objective situation or context. Personality refers to the stable differences between people consisting of both cognitive and emotional aspects. The Big 5 personality traits provide a framework to understand the relatively enduring aspects of character, feeling, and thinking that differentiate individuals (McCrae & Costa, 1991). The traits include extraversion (introversion), neuroticism (emotional stability), conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience. We are not aware of any studies that have examined how the Big 5 personality traits help to explain positioning judgements, despite intuitive links and a vast body of personality research. Extraversion and neuroticism have received the most attention (due to their role in shaping our emotions and judgement processes), and thus comprise the main focus of our review.

Extraversion and neuroticism are linked to emotional and motivational systems that may be highly relevant to making positioning judgements. Although propensities to experience positive and negative emotions have always been part of these traits (particularly neuroticism), personality psychologists increasingly see them as rooted in motivational and emotional systems (e.g., Carver *et al.*, 2000). Gray's (1981) seminal approach to extraversion and neuroticism illustrates the central role of motivation and emotion. Drawing on neurophysiology, he suggested that these traits emerged from individual differences in the strengths of two independent motivational systems. The Behavioral Activation System (BAS) responds to conditioned cues of reward in the environment, and creates approach motivation. People who score high on extraversion have a highly sensitive BAS, and are thus highly sensitive to reward cues (e.g., the opportunity to purchase an 'attention grabbing' product). In other words, the approach-oriented behaviour of extraverts stems from their propensity to notice and pursue potential rewards. A second system, the Behavioural Inhibition System (BIS) monitors the environment for punishment cues and

creates avoidance motivation. People who score high on neuroticism have a highly sensitive BIS, and are thus highly sensitive to punishment cues (e.g., “my friends might make fun of this blouse, so I won’t buy it, despite the fact that I really like it”). A number of similar theories highlight individual differences in approach and motivation as central personality characteristics, likely underlying the more descriptive dimensions of extraversion and neuroticism (e.g., Carver, 2001; Cloninger, 1986; Higgins, 1997; Tellegen, 1985).

The emotional consequences of strong approach or avoidance tendencies are readily apparent: an approach orientation should create more positive emotional experience, and an avoidance motivation should create more negative emotional experience. Consistent with this suggestion, extraversion and neuroticism consistently predict positive and negative emotional experience respectively. This has been found with day-to-day emotions using experience sampling methods and with reactions to positive and negative laboratory mood inductions (Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991; Lucas & Fujita, 2000; Zelenski & Larsen, 1999). The strong interrelations among descriptive traits, motivational systems, and affective experience provides the basis for linking extraversion and neuroticism with judgements. In short, these dispositions likely influence the way people interpret ambiguous events, the likelihood and intensity of emotional reactions, and how emotion is expressed in language (Rusting, 1999) - all of which are critical to judgements in an interactive environment. However, judgements made in virtual environments have received scant empirical research attention.

Bower’s (1981) network theory of affect suggests that emotions help organize our memory. More specifically, he asserts that emotions form nodes within an associative network of information (memory). When a node is activated by emotional information in the environment and/or emotional experience (e.g., a television advertisement for a particular product), similarly valenced memories easily come to mind because they are closely related to the emotion node. These thoughts then cause judgements that are biased in an affect-congruent manner. In relation to positioning, a message may trigger an emotional node (e.g., an image of a sports car flowing through turns on a seaside road, triggering a feeling of excitement) and thereby influence positioning judgements in an affect (excitement)-congruent manner. This activation of the emotion node may also persist beyond judgements of the initial trigger (i.e., bias may carry over to future, unrelated judgements).

Combining personality’s strong emotion links with Bower’s network theory of affect provides a rationale for predicting personality congruent cognition (Clark & Teasdale, 1985; Rusting, 1999). That is, extraversion may predict positive positioning judgement biases, and neuroticism may predict negative positioning judgement biases. In addition to propensities toward more intense emotions in situations, part of extraversion and neuroticism may be the cognitive structures that develop over a lifetime of positive and negative emotional experiences (Rusting, 1999). Such differences in cognitive structures could produce interpretation and positioning judgement biases over and above momentary emotion states (Rusting & Larsen, 1998; Zelenski & Larsen, 2002). In other words, extraversion and neuroticism include more elaborate positive and negative emotion nodes respectively, and thus predict the probability of experiencing emotion, and the extent to which emotion states influence positioning judgements.

Another framework popular in the affect-congruent literature is the affect-as-information approach (Schwarz & Clore, 1983), and it too has been extended to personality differences in

judgement. According to this view, emotions can provide information that can be useful in making positioning judgements. That is, to the extent that the emotion is perceived as relevant to the evaluation, it cues processing in an affect-congruent direction. Although affect can aid judgement, errors in the perception of its relevance can also cause problems. Consider, for example, an individual who acts only on emotional desire without concern for whether they can afford the product: this phenomenon may help to explain high levels of credit card debt. Along these lines, presumably stable positioning judgements can be influenced by ephemeral moods (e.g., those produced in a lab or by nice weather) (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). People with different traits may also view emotional information as more or less relevant to judgements (Gasper & Clore, 1998). For example, Updegraff, Gable and Taylor (2004) suggest that beyond the direct influence of emotional experience on satisfaction, approach-oriented (i.e., high BAS) people may weigh this information more heavily when making judgements. Using experience sampling data, they found that the (positive) relationship between positive emotional experience and judgements was stronger for approach-oriented participants. An informed understanding that personality and emotion may combine, in different ways, to influence judgements, makes an examination of positioning strategy and judgements a novel and exciting context for testing well established theories.

Given their direct links with emotion, most research on traits has focused on extraversion and neuroticism. However, additional constructs, including emotional intelligence (EI), likely are also pertinent to positioning judgements. EI has been defined as “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 5). Gasper and Clore (2000) showed that people high in EI are more likely to use the informational value of their and others’ emotions. Emotionally intelligent individuals are able to assess the ‘emotional climate’ of the situation and react in a manner that uses the informational value of the situation to make an informed judgement (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). We concur with the sentiments of Fineman (2004) that, in measuring emotions, one must place emphasis on the interactional and context-focused dimensions of emotional experience. The scope of our inquiry into EI is restricted to postulating how people who are aware of self and others’ emotions may form different positioning judgements than people low in EI.

To summarize, individual differences in personality are clearly important in considering emotion and judgement. Dispositions, either at the level of trait affectivity or broader motivational systems (i.e., BIS and BAS) describe propensities to experience more frequent and intense emotion states. Emotion-related individual differences seem to include cognitive processing biases, and these processes often involve the way people use affective information in making judgements. Positioning provides a context to uncover patterns of relating, nuances in current theory, and the exciting possibility of uncovering new ways in which personality and emotion combine to influence cognitive judgements. An informed understanding that personality and emotion may combine, in different ways, to influence positioning judgements, makes an examination of positioning from the perspective of the consumer a novel and exciting context for testing well established theories.

Emotion States

While personality can help to inform our understanding of positioning judgements, emotion states should not be overlooked. That is, while patterns of emotion over time can be safely aggregated into trait affectivity, there is still value in examining the role of specific emotion states, that may or may not be congruent with dominant personality characteristics, on positioning judgements. For example, how do feelings of joy, elation, sadness, anger and fear (to name a select few primary emotions) influence positioning judgements? Ries and Trout's (1981) classic definition of positioning causes us to question what role emotions play "in the mind of the prospect". Recent evidence suggests that we make judgements both consciously and subconsciously, and that our state emotions play a large role in their formation (Rusting, 1999). When individuals experience positive emotions (e.g., joy, happiness) they have been found to be more receptive to appeals (Kempf, 1999). This logic has not been tested in organizational, brand, or product positioning, but the same dynamics are arguably operating. That is, even short term affective states may play a significant role in both initial and subsequent positioning judgements. Combining an appreciation for the role of emotion states, when situated within the larger context of personality theories, offers new ways of exploring if, how and why people make positioning judgements.

Summary and Research Implications

To summarize, individual differences in personality are clearly important in considering emotion and positioning judgements. Dispositions (either at the level of trait affectivity or broader motivational systems (i.e., BIS and BAS)) describe propensities to experience more frequent and intense emotion states. Emotion-related individual differences seem to include cognitive processing biases, and these processes often involve the way people use affective information in making positioning judgements. Positioning provides a context to uncover patterns of relating, nuances in current theory, and the exciting possibility of uncovering new ways in which personality and emotion combine to influence cognitive judgements about products, services or organizations. Future research needs both a more accurate portrayal of actual firm positioning strategies, and the individual differences that lead to different consumer positioning judgements.

In setting a course for future research in the fertile ground of affect and marketing it is important to distinguish between the role of marketing practitioners, in trying to position organizations, brands, products, and so on, and the role of individual consumers in consciously or subconsciously arriving at evaluative judgements about the organization, brand or product. Table 2 outlines a potentially productive way to conceptualize future research into affect in positioning.

Table 2 outlines some of the potential avenues for future research into affect and positioning, and differentiates between the individual consumer's judgements and the organization's positioning strategy. While this paper focused on the internal personality traits and emotions of consumers and the internal positioning strategy of organizations, future research may be well served by acknowledging the wide range of potential confounds. That is, while an organization may utilize a conscious affect-based positioning strategy, the degree to which the consumer may ultimately make a positioning judgement that is aligned with the company's desires is far from being a linear process. Instead, other variables, including, for example,

previous experiences with the product and peer group attitudes are likely to impact on positioning judgements. Similarly, notwithstanding the extensive literature on positioning in general, empirical research on the actual positioning strategies used by firms is scarce. As a result, the positioning strategies of practitioners are still cloaked in mystery, and shedding light on the degree of conscious use of affect would be an invaluable addition to the literature. Further, from the organization's perspective the positioning strategy adopted is likely to be, at least in part, a function of the competitive environment it faces. That is, a new company may want to position itself in relation to major industry players, while a cutting-edge firm may choose to utilize a positioning strategy that ignores the competition completely (unlike standard "positioning", "repositioning", and "depositioning the competition" strategies, all of which are intended to take place within the existing competitive horizon, the latter strategy means creating a new horizon that ignores competitor-defined parameters and establishes a new playing field which the cutting-edge attempts to "own" in the consumer's mind). The degree to which emotions play a role in both positioning strategy and consumer positioning judgements is largely uncharted territory. However, by utilizing existing theory relating to individual differences and borrowing lessons from the consumer behaviour and advertising literature, positioning research has the potential to unravel the complex dynamics of positioning strategy in marketing.

Table 2. Future Research into Affect and Positioning

External	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication media (print, television, internet, etc.) • Peer group attitudes • Social desirability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competitive pressures (need to differentiate) • Industry norms • Regulatory environment
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personality traits • Emotion states • Previous experiences • Beliefs and values • Cognitive dissonance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positioning strategy • Degree of conscious use of affect • Marketing mix strategy • Execution tactics
Individual Consumer		Organization

Conclusion

This paper argues that a more comprehensive understanding of the role of affect on individual positioning judgements and organizational positioning strategies is required in future research and theorizing. We examine current advances in affect in marketing and argue that positioning, although depicted as the strategic driver of the marketing mix, is lagging behind other cognate fields in affective research and theorizing. We detail the advances in both neuropsychology and personality psychology in an attempt to bridge this gap. While the hedonic vs. utilitarian

distinction may be useful for broadly defining product dimensions, we have argued that it may also serve to perpetuate the dual-mind perspective that thinking and feeling are separate processes. Advances in neuroscience have found their way into the marketing literature (e.g., Gordon, 2002; Williamson, 2002), but such lessons have not yet captured the attention of researchers working on positioning-related issues. Marketing strategy need not view cognition and affect as either/or propositions. Rather, it would be useful to examine the extent to which practitioners understand that consumers experience emotions as a result of something meaningful in their environment, and that all products, services, brands, and organizations might strive to be so positioned. Similarly, it would be useful to determine how consumers form positioning judgements – yet another issue that has received scant, if any, attention in the literature to date. Our approach places the dynamic reality of the consumer brain, and individual differences therein, at the forefront of future research and theorizing regarding positioning judgements and strategy.

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